



Trade Unions in a NEP-like country

Today's **attached** text by V I Lenin on the “Role and Function of Trade Unions under the NEP” speaks unequivocally of *“the duty of the trade unions to protect the interests of the working people”*, in both private and public enterprises.

We have seen that Lenin was ill from the start of the NEP, then progressively more ill, and finally bedridden and unable to speak for months until his death in January, 1924. If we

read the documents we would also have noticed that the Civil War was also continuing until 1922.

Later, the richer, capitalising peasants or “kulaks”, who employed others as proletarian workers, were demonised, correctly or not, and the NEP came to an end around 1928. The NEP therefore had a short and constrained life, and consequently, a limited literature. But ours is not to examine the NEP in great detail. We just want to note that in Lenin’s view, this was the correct transitional arrangement, and to see why Lenin thought so.

Large-scale industry was mostly in state hands but small businesses were capitalist. This was not merely expedient. It was necessary. It was the right way, and not a liberal way.

Here in South Africa we do not yet have proletarian state power in the way that the Russian workers obviously had it at the time of Lenin’s writing of this text (1922). But in other respects we have a similar set of circumstances. Big-scale industry is either in the hands of monopoly capital or of the state, leaving a very large portion of the population having to fend for itself, as survivalists, entrepreneurs, SMMEs and all the rest of conceptual divisions of the petty-bourgeoisie. These are mostly poor people, and they have to be helped to survive.

But above all in South Africa, just as under the NEP in Russia in the 1920s, the class struggle continues. Lenin is very frank about this. In the end there is not going to be a win-win situation, and there is no win-win along the way, either, but

only class struggle with both winners and losers. Here is an example of what Lenin had to say on this score, in this work:

“As long as classes exist, the class struggle is inevitable. In the period of transition from capitalism to socialism the existence of classes is inevitable; and the Programme of the Russian Communist Party definitely states that we are taking only the first steps in the transition from capitalism to socialism. Hence, the Communist Party, the Soviet government and the trade unions must frankly admit the existence of an economic struggle and its inevitability until the electrification of industry and agriculture is completed—at least in the main—and until small production and the supremacy of the market are thereby cut off at the roots.”

Trade unions are all about “*contact with the masses*” and therefore cannot be sectarian:

“Under no circumstances must trade union members be required to subscribe to any specific political views; in this respect, as well as in respect of religion, the trade unions must be non-partisan.”

The interest of the working class is “developmental” in a material sense, namely an “*enormous increase in the productive forces*”. Lenin puts it like this:

“Following its seizure of political power, the principal and fundamental interest of the proletariat lies in securing an enormous increase in the productive forces of society and in the output of manufactured goods.”

Lenin concludes:

“The Communist Party, the Soviet bodies that conduct cultural and educational activities and all Communist members of trade unions must therefore devote far more attention to the ideological struggle against petty-bourgeois influences, trends and deviations among the trade unions, especially because the New Economic Policy is bound to lead to a certain strengthening of capitalism. It is urgently necessary to counteract this by intensifying the struggle against petty-bourgeois influences upon the working class.”

A NEP-like situation, or developmental state, which South Africa now has, involves a deliberate transitional expansion of the petty-bourgeoisie, and therefore also requires a constant struggle to maintain a “superstructure” over this petty-bourgeoisie. Such is the lesson of Lenin in this case.

The formation and the growth of the proletariat will in due course become determinant, because class struggle is the motor of history, and because the proletariat is the gravedigger of capitalism. But in the mean time, the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie must continue with their historical role of creating employment and by doing so, creating the bigger, and finally overwhelmingly massive and politicised proletariat.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [Role and Functions of the TUs under NEP, Lenin, 1921](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).